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Helena, Montana • Phone 447-4000 • irstaff@helenair.com • Vol. 54, No. 81



Asarco spills tainted water

Broken underground water line causes million-gallon leak high in arsenic, cadmium and lead

By GRANT SASEK
IR Staff Writer

EAST HELENA — A recent break in an underground water line at the Asarco smelter here spilled an estimated 1 million gallons of contaminated water into the ground beneath the plant before being stopped Thursday.

Signs of the leak first were noticed Feb. 3, and efforts to find and stop the leak in the complex web of piping beneath the plant led to the temporary shutdown of all but non-essential operations at the facility.

The leak also has prompted plant managers to discontinue underground water service to portions of the plant and reroute water to other,

essential parts of the plant in hurriedly installed above-ground piping systems.

THE LEAK ALSO has caught the attention of both state and federal regulators, who still were wondering Thursday afternoon just what had happened and what new threats it may pose to an already-contaminated area.

"This certainly has our attention," said Ed Thamke, complaint management section chief for the state Department of Environmental Quality.

Susan Zazzali, an environmental engineer for the EPA, described the spill as "A very serious thing."

ADDING to Zazzali's concerns is that Asarco officials first notified the EPA of the spill on

Tuesday, Feb. 10 — a week after the leak was discovered. The state Department of Environmental Quality was notified Monday.

"I think they should have notified us closer to the third," Zazzali said. "We would have preferred more details sooner."

Jon Nickel, the smelter's environmental manager, said the leak was reported just as soon as plant officials realized they had a significant spill of reportable quantities.

Nickel said that after becoming aware of the leak on Feb. 3, workers started isolating portions of the underground system in hopes of controlling the leak. By Feb. 5, they had done just that, Nickel said. But on Feb. 7, a Saturday,



(More WATER news 7A)

The Asarco smelter

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FRIDAY

February 13, 1998

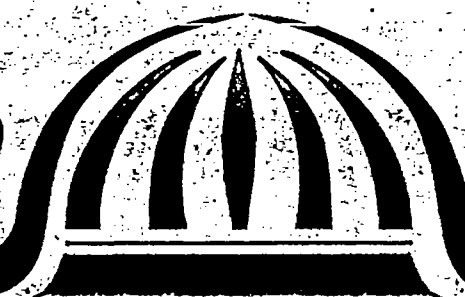
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(More WATER, page 7A) The Asarco smelter

(IR photo by George Lane)

▼ MPC SELLOFF

Helena dam panel gets busy



Montana's mental-health contractor sold

Water

Continued from Page 1A

workers noticed another significant drop in water levels and it became clear another leak had developed, Nickel said. Monday, Nickel notified state authorities.

ALL THIS PAST week, workers have been busy constructing an above-ground system to carry water to essential areas of the plant, and at 9:30 a.m. Thursday, the last branches of the underground system were shut off and the leak was stopped, said plant manager John Shaw.

By then, an estimated 1 million gallons of water — enough to fill Helena's Memorial Park swimming pool two times — had carried a "high estimate" of eight pounds of arsenic and 80 pounds of cadmium and another 80 pounds of lead into the ground surrounding the leaks, Nickel said.

THURSDAY AFTERNOON federal and state regulators still were waiting for written reports from Asarco, and both Zazzali and Thamke said they did not yet know all the details of what had happened or to what extent the spill threatens the nearby ground water. Both Shaw and Nickel said they believe the spill poses no imminent

threat to human health or the environment. And, they added, if the heavy metals do make their way into the aquifer, they will be in ground water geologically separated from drinking-water sources.

Zazzali and Thamke said they need more information before they decide how much of a threat the spill poses.

What everyone already does agree on is that plant processes leading to the spill and what should be done to address the already existing plume of contaminated water under the plant soon will be the focus of long discussions.

Both issues — the handling of water at the smelter and existing pollution to the ground water under the facility — are to be addressed under conditions of a recently agreed-to multi-million dollar settlement between Asarco and federal agencies.

"This certainly has the potential to change how we deal with those issues in it (the decree)," Zazzali said.

JUST LAST MONTH, officials with Asarco, the EPA and the U.S. Department of Justice announced an agreement to resolve alleged environmental violations at the Asarco smelter in East Helena

and other Asarco plants.

Among the violations Asarco agreed to address in that decree was the discharge of contaminated process water into the ground water. Nickel said that considering alternatives to the aging, underground water system used at the plant already were to be part of those discussions.

Those changes already have started. Shaw said now that the underground system has been turned off, it will remain that way.

"We'll never go back to that underground piping system," Shaw vowed.

THAMKE SAID Thursday he planned to have inspectors at the smelter either later that day or today. Zazzali said EPA inspectors also plan visits to the smelter.

Both state and federal regulators have jurisdiction over looking into issues raised by the spill. Issues surrounding threats to the ground water will be addressed by the state Department of Environmental Quality. Other issues focusing on processes at the plant that led to the spill will be the focus of EPA regulators.

Pam Hillery, an EPA community involvement coordinator in Helena, said regulators are sensitive about the handling of plant

process water because "It usually contains the gamut of heavy metals and arsenic," Hillery said.

THE QUESTION of if the spill should result in penalties or fines won't be decided for some time.

"Right now, we just want to address the problem," Thamke said.

Thamke did add that in most cases, if spills are caused by a malfunction rather than by operator error or malicious intent, fines or penalties are not imposed.

Zazzali said the EPA has a similar approach. But, she added, the agency also considers issues such as how quickly the event was reported and what type of response was taken by the company.

ANNE HEDGES, of the Montana Environmental Information Center, said Asarco should face penalties — regardless of if it was an accident or not.

"They (Asarco) are responsible for maintaining their equipment in good condition, that is a part of their operating expense," Hedges said. "We have an old house and we have to put more money into it. That's the nature of the beast."

The Asarco smelter in East Helena is more than 100 years old.

Dam

Continued from Page 1A

ALONG WITH THE Helena committee members, seated at the table will be representatives from the City of Great Falls, the Montana Electrical Co-operative Association, and possibly from the City of Missoula. All have expressed some interest in possibly buying some or all of the dams owned by MPC.

MPC shocked many Montanans in December when it announced it was selling its 12 hydro-electric dams, one storage dam and five thermal coal-fired plants. Groep-

per, who initially had been investigating ways for the city to purchase power more cheaply, then started wondering if the city should consider buying the source of the power. He said he's hoping to find a way to guarantee control over the cost of electricity, plus have a say in the way the dams, the Missouri River water and the surrounding lands are operated.

Groepper first approached his fellow city commission members about buying just the two local dams. But since MPC is reluctant to parcel out its dams, Helena officials are exploring the possibility

forming some type of co-op to put together a package deal.

There are probably, from the City of Helena's perspective, advantages to partnering with other people to spread the cost. "We have less risk doing this in a larger group," Groepper said. "Those are things we'll try to sort out."

He said some of those entities already may have started looking into long-range market forecasts for electricity; how much maintenance the dams need, how much the power could be sold for and what the price of the dams might be.

store novels and an office complete with record books and notes.

Making it even more attractive as an interpretive site is that the

how to make the site accessible to the public should be made by early this summer.

"We need to do that soon,"

Helena Ranger District office at 2001 Poplar St. in Helena.

■ The Forest Service will accept comments on the plan through March 13. Comments should be

Mine

Continued from Page 1A

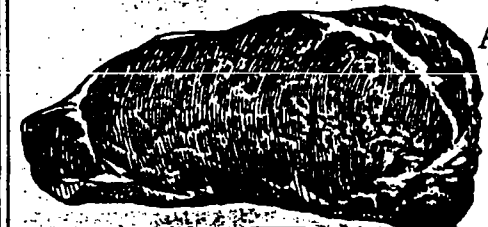
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